

Head of the class

Virginia HBCUs' enrollment outpaces peers

by Courtney Mabeus-Brown

Donald Alexander Jr. considered multiple schools, as well as the Air Force, before he landed at Norfolk State University in 2019.

The Chesapeake native grew up with strong ties to the university, one of Virginia's two public historically Black colleges and universities. As an elementary schooler, Alexander went to summer camp on Norfolk State's campus, and several aunts, uncles and cousins attended the school. His uncle, Melvin T. Stith Sr., a former dean at Florida State University, received his bachelor's degree from Norfolk State and served as its interim president from 2017 to 2019.

After high school, Alexander attended a summer program offered by Norfolk State to help him prepare for the academic experience, and fell in love with the college. He also found comfort in building connections with peers who had similar backgrounds and experiences.

"We were in a time where racial profiling was active again. It was a big thing when I was going into college, and I feel like a lot of African Americans, when they choose HBCUs, they choose them because of the comfortability that they will have," says Alexander, now a 22-year-old senior majoring in computer science. The shared experience of an HBCU, he says, "allows you to have more people to lean on, to have more people to get close with."

At a time when overall undergraduate enrollment is declining nationally, Alexander is among a wave of Black students who are choosing HBCUs over predominantly white colleges and universities.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, undergraduate enrollment in colleges and universities declined 4.2% from 2020 to 2022.

Meanwhile, undergraduate enrollment at HBCUs grew 2.5% in fall 2022, reversing a 1.7% decline from the previous year. That growth was driven by a 6.6% increase in freshmen enrolling at HBCUs, the NSCRC noted.

Virginia's 15 four-year public universities, including HBCUs Norfolk State and Virginia State University, are slightly ahead of national trends. Undergraduate enrollment declined 2% between fall 2020 and fall 2022, according to an analysis of data from the State Council for Higher Education for Virginia. Enrollment at Virginia private colleges that report data to SCHEV fell 4% during the same period.

However, during the same two-year period, VSU and NSU saw huge undergraduate enrollment boosts — increases of 18% and 7% — far outstripping their larger, predominantly white public counterparts. Only William & Mary came close to matching those increases, with a 9% enrollment boost from 2020 to 2022. By comparison, Longwood and Radford universities saw undergraduate enrollment decreases of 20% and 18%, respectively, during that same time.

Nationally, combined total enrollment at HBCUs grew 25% from 1980 to 2015, rising from 234,000 to 293,000. But that growth wasn't as rapid as it was for all colleges and universities combined, which saw enrollment nearly double during the same time period, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. From 1976 to 2014, the percentage of Black college students attending HBCUs fell from 18% to 8%, a trend that has been reversing more recently.

Fall 2022 enrollment data from two of Virginia's three private HBCUs, Hampton and Virginia Union universities, is incomplete, and neither granted Virginia Business'



requests for interviews. Virginia University of Lynchburg, another Virginia HBCU, does not report data to SCHEV because it does not receive state funding. VUL did not respond to interview requests from Virginia Business.

Social justice, strategic planning

Administrators at VSU and NSU say enrollment increases at their universities are a result of numerous factors and follows a trend seen nationally among the 101 HBCUs located across 19 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands.



Donald Alexander Jr., a senior at Norfolk State University, says the personal attention and family atmosphere he's found at the HBCU has helped him to push himself to succeed.

Juan Alexander, associate vice president for enrollment management at NSU, and VSU Provost Donald Palm, who is also senior vice president of academic and student success and engagement, cite the Black Lives Matter movement for helping to raise the visibility of HBCUs. Social justice rallies that swept the country in 2020 fueled greater corporate awareness for diversity, equity and inclusion and sparked philanthropic giving to HBCUs, including record gifts from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. Scott's 2021 donations of \$30 million to VSU in 2020 and \$40 million

to NSU represented the largest gifts each university has ever received. She also gave a record \$30 million to Hampton University in 2020.

While those donations also led to media exposure and are helping fund scholarships and other initiatives, including research laboratories, faculty and staff conferences and training, and venture capital funds at NSU, they also coincided with efforts to enhance admissions, says Alexander, who also credits the university's marketing strategies and use of alumni in boosting enrollment.

For example, Norfolk State had also been working to streamline and remove barriers to its admissions process. NSU's Alexander (no relation to NSU senior Donald Alexander) says that around December 2021 the university joined the Common App, an undergraduate application that allows students to apply to as many as 1,000 member colleges and universities by using one form. That's allowed NSU, which has only about five recruiters, to expand its reach to students it might not otherwise reach. Fewer than about a dozen HBCUs currently use the Common App, and about

30% of NSU's incoming freshmen in fall 2022 applied using it, he says.

In addition, NSU added virtual college tours and virtual appointments, including with financial aid counselors. It also moved to a new customer relations portal that allows the university to keep in touch with students "at every stage" of the enrollment and application process.

"We're up about 131% from last year in our freshman first-time acceptances ... so that's a good sign," Alexander says. "It looks like we're gonna have a pretty hefty freshman class again this coming fall."

Meanwhile, VSU, located in Chesterfield County's Ettrick area near Petersburg, broke a 30-year record for the 2022-23 academic year, enrolling more than 1,700 first-time freshmen and transfer students, for an increase of 550 new students over the previous academic year, which also broke enrollment records.

VSU launched a strategic plan in fall 2020. One prong of that plan includes improved marketing and branding efforts. Social media is an important part of that, and has gotten attention, Palm adds. "Our students are so engaged. That's where are students are — on social media. So we are in the social media game."

VSU ranked No. 27 among all NCAA Division II schools for overall social media engagement in 2022, according to social media marketing analysis company Rival IQ, but took the No. 1 spot on Twitter, with 19,043 engagements, and No. 3 on Facebook, with 151,362 engagements.

Another program helping boost enrollment is the state-sponsored Virginia College Affordability Network. Launched in 2021 to support the state's two public HBCUs, it provides free tuition for Pell Grant-eligible first-year students who live within 40 miles of VSU or within 45 miles of NSU. About 600 VSU students have taken advantage of the program and about 300 students have benefited from it at NSU.

The program has helped encourage some students who may have looked farther from home for their higher education to stay local, Palm says.

"We're reaching those students who — many students want to go elsewhere — they want to leave home to go to college," Palm says.



Virginia State University Provost Donald Palm says branding, social media and a state-sponsored program offering free tuition for eligible local students have helped fuel record enrollment.



NSU Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management Juan Alexander says the university is one of only a few HBCUs that use the Common App.

At NSU, Donald Alexander credits the personal attention and family atmosphere he's found there with helping him push himself, something he's unsure might have happened if he'd gone to a non-HBCU. He's been a member of NSU's student government, including its chief justice during the 2021 to 2022 academic year, and after the Black Lives Matter protests he served as an SGA liaison to handle student relations with campus police.

He likes that the university hosts "Soul Food Thursday," offering Southern comfort foods like fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and cornbread.

"There's nothing like an HBCU, honestly, and any HBCU student could attest to that," he says. "The atmosphere there is unmatched. It's just something that is going to stick with you for the rest of your life." ■

Sarah King contributed to this story.

Virginia HBCUs at a glance

Virginia has five historically Black colleges and universities, spread across Hampton Roads and Central Virginia. Some of the oldest in the nation, these institutions are a mix of public and privately run schools.

Hampton University

Located in Hampton, the private, not-for-profit university is on 314 acres and has 3,317 students, 2,867 of them undergraduates.¹ It was founded in 1868 as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. In July 2022, Hampton welcomed its new president, retired U.S. Army Gen. Darrell K. Williams; he succeeds William R. Harvey, who had served as the university's president since 1978.

Norfolk State University

The four-year public school near downtown Norfolk was founded in 1935. It has a 134-acre campus and has 5,786 students. NSU's December 2021 commencement speech was delivered by music superstar and Virginia Beach native Pharrell Williams, who also hosted his Elephant in the Room business forum at NSU that year. NSU unveiled its 6,000-square-foot Micron-NSU Nanofabrication Cleanroom in October 2021.

Virginia State University

Virginia State University was founded in 1882 as one of Virginia's two public land-grant institutions (the other is Virginia Tech). Located in Chesterfield County's Ettrick area near Petersburg, its 231-acre campus overlooks the Appomattox River. VSU has 4,300 undergraduates and 348 graduate students.

Virginia Union University

The private university was founded in 1865. Hartshorn Memorial College, a women's college established in Richmond in 1883, became part of VUU in 1932. Storer College, a Black Baptist college in West Virginia that closed in 1955, merged its endowment with VUU. The university has 1,730 students, 1,243 of them undergraduates.¹

Virginia University of Lynchburg

Virginia University of Lynchburg traces its origins to the 1886 founding of the Lynchburg Baptist Seminary. Renamed over the years, VUL was incorporated as Virginia University of Lynchburg in 1996. The private not-for-profit school has 558 students, 217 of them undergraduates.¹

¹ National Center for Education Statistics

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MONEY MACHINE

How much is a college degree really worth?

by Courtney Mabeus-Brown

In 2009, Donald Hart found himself in an enviable position.

Leading up to his graduation from Ocean Lakes High School in Virginia Beach, Hart had been accepted to a slew of the state's public, four-year universities: Virginia Tech, the University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, George Mason University and James Madison University.

Attracted by the convenience of studying close to home, as well as the opportunity to play trumpet in the university's new marching band, he wound up choosing ODU. But there was another reason ODU stood out from the competition: sticker price.

For the 2009-2010 academic year, ODU's annual tuition and fees came to \$7,318, a price tag that would increase to \$8,450 by the time Hart graduated in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and about \$15,000 in school debt. ODU charged less than most other Virginia public universities Hart considered, and the tuition and fees didn't even factor in room and board, or the cost of moving to a different city. He wanted to get the best value for his money.

"That was a little bit of a factor, too," Hart recalls. "I'm like, 'Well, do I want to have extra debt, or do I just want to get a degree and [start a career]?"

After graduation, Hart landed a job with New York Life Insurance Co., which provided matching contributions that helped him pay off his student loan debt about two

years ago. After a stint working in New York City, he's back in Virginia Beach, training financial advisers for the insurance company, earning about \$140,000 to \$160,000 annually, including bonuses.

"If I look back, finishing college, I would never have guessed I [would be] where I am today at all," Hart says. "The critical thinking skills and the building relationships and doing different things while in college, I think that all ... [helped] mold me to be successful in really any business I would have chosen."

Since Hart graduated a decade ago, the cost of going to college in Virginia has continued to escalate, now averaging \$14,538 per year across the state's 15 public four-year colleges and universities, according to data from the State Council on Higher Education for Virginia. That's up from \$10,387 in the 2013-2014 academic year — a nearly 40% increase over the past decade.

With the cost of earning a degree soaring to new heights — the national average to attend a four-year public university in 2022-2023 was \$10,950 annually for tuition and fees, according to the College Board — fewer people are heading off to college, and debate has ensued over the value of postsecondary education. (Enrollment numbers could be further chilled, academics say, by the U.S. Supreme Court's June ruling overturning a Biden administration plan to wipe out more than \$400 billion in student debt.)

Furthermore, amid a tight labor market, policymakers and employers are placing less emphasis on four-year degrees and more on certificate programs and other nondegree career pathways.

Perhaps the most prominent example can be found in a new state government hiring policy. Effective July 1, in an effort to attract more state workers, Gov. Glenn Youngkin eliminated degree requirements and/or preferences for about 90% of state job listings. (Maryland implemented a similar change in 2022.)

Nevertheless, even amid record tuition rates, a college or university degree remains the likely best avenue for increasing one's lifetime earning power, experts say, providing a return on investment unrivaled by stocks or bonds.

"Investing in a college education for many people will be the second biggest investment they ever make, probably after buying a house," says Martin Van Der Werf, director of editorial and education policy at Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW). "It's more expensive than buying a car, which is probably the other major purchase many people face in their lives. So, to actually understand what you're going to get from that investment ... is a pretty important piece of data."

What it's worth

Graduating from a public four-year university can add from \$765,000 to more than \$1 million to an individual's lifetime earnings in the U.S., according to a 2021 report prepared for SCHEV by Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs focusing on postcollege outcomes among public college and university graduates from 2007 to 2018.

Not surprisingly, a 2022 report on return on investment from bachelor's degrees, Georgetown's CEW came to a similar conclusion — adding that public colleges, with lower tuitions and lesser student debt, provide better returns on average than private colleges.

Forty years after enrolling — or about the length of a career — average graduates of four-year public colleges can expect a net economic gain of \$1.03 million in adjusted earnings, compared with \$984,000 for the



A decade after graduation, Old Dominion University alumni Donald Hart trains financial advisers in Virginia Beach for New York Life Insurance Co., a job that pays him \$140,000 to \$160,000 per year.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

In the Georgetown ROI study, net economic gain is a calculation for adjusted cumulative income 40 years after college enrollment, deducting five years of attendance costs for bachelor's degree programs and three years for associate degree or certificate programs. Cumulative income is based on salary remaining constant 10 years after enrollment, the most recent time frame for which data is available, so income estimates are very conservative, Georgetown researchers acknowledge. Ten-year data is collected from all enrolled students, regardless of graduation status.

average private nonprofit college graduate, according to the Georgetown report, which ranked 4,500 U.S. colleges, including community colleges, public two- and four-year institutions, private nonprofit colleges and for-profit colleges, by their return on investment.

Ten years after enrollment, though, the story is a bit different. Community colleges and institutions that offer associate degrees and certificate programs provide better short-term returns because graduates can get to work quickly, often with less debt and fewer years of study than their four-year counterparts, CEW found. Over the decades, however, four-year graduates have much greater earnings power. (A 2019 CEW study found that associate degree and certificate holders brought in a median \$141,000 in 10-year adjusted net earnings, compared with \$107,000 for all college graduates.)

"College typically pays off, but the return on investment varies by credential, program of study and institution," CEW Director Anthony P. Carnevale says in a statement. "It's important to inform people about the risk of taking out loans but not graduating, which could leave them without the increased earnings that would help them repay those loans."

Here in Virginia, it may come as no surprise that some of the state's most prestigious public and private universities

rank higher than their in-state peers when it comes to return on investment. Examining how much money a degree could bring a graduate over a 40-year career, private liberal arts school Washington and Lee University leads the way at \$1.82 million, followed by U.Va. with \$1.64 million and Virginia Tech at \$1.55 million, according to Georgetown's 2022 report.

After just 10 years, however, Newport News-based Riverside College of Health Careers, a private, not-for-profit school offering associate degrees and certificates in health care, ranks No. 1 for return on investment, bringing \$263,000 in adjusted net earnings, followed by Northern Virginia Community College at \$225,000, according to CEW's data. Washington and Lee ranks No. 3 for 10-year net earnings, at \$216,000.

It takes less time and less money to earn an associate degree or certificate, Van Der Werf, one of the study's authors, says. While some students enroll in community college with plans to transfer to a four-year institution, others are seeking a quick career boost, such as a promotion or other job opportunities, after earning an associate degree or credential.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median weekly earnings of bachelor's degree graduates in 2022 was \$1,432, compared with \$1,005 for associate degree holders and \$853 for workers with just a high school diploma.

"Basically ... having a college degree leads to greater earnings," Van Der Werf says.

'Shopper's mentality'

Earnings are only one data point that experts consider when examining a college degree's potential ROI; the broader picture can be much more nuanced, based on a variety of factors. For instance, pay may vary depending on where someone lives. And universities with higher graduation rates generally produce graduates with higher earnings. Majors matter, too — a professional with a bachelor's degree in engineering may make a higher salary than a worker with an arts and humanities degree.

According to the VCU report, 56.3% of 15,348 survey respondents who earned a certificate, associate or bachelor's degree from a Virginia higher education institution said their education was worth the cost.

That's a satisfaction rate that varies when broken down by degree type, race, gender, discipline, geography and graduation year; for example, 64% of those who majored in STEM disciplines agreed their education was worth the cost, compared with 47.6% of liberal arts graduates.

During the past five years at Virginia Tech, parents and prospective students have been asking more and more frequently about return on investment — including more affluent families, says Juan Espinoza, director of admissions and associate vice president for enrollment and degree management. "If you're looking at affordability," he says, "you're also looking at ROI. You can't disconnect the two."

Families have more of a "shopper's mentality" these days, given the national conversation about whether college is worth it, says Espinoza, a 2004 Tech graduate who

was a first-generation college student. In particular, parents want to know about student success, including graduation rates, which were 85% at Virginia Tech last year, according to SCHEV. "I think it's a legitimate question," he says, "and one that colleges need to be able to explain to students and their families."

University officials frequently point to student success when talking about ROI, and that's a value that may transcend a padded bank account. A college education, they contend, can lead to healthier life outcomes, greater civic participation and upward social mobility.

Getting ahead

At George Mason University, many students "are starting behind the start line," says Saskia Campbell, GMU's executive director of university career services, citing



A college education provides graduates a vehicle for social mobility, says David Burge, George Mason University's vice president for enrollment management.

the university's history of educating a diverse student body, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Forty years after enrollment, a GMU bachelor's degree recipient is likely to see a net economic gain of \$1.4 million, ranking GMU No. 6 among Virginia's public and private nonprofit colleges and universities for that data point, according to Georgetown's study. And while GMU had a 91.4% admittance rate for the 2021-2022 school year, it also had a 70% graduation rate.

"To me, that is the very definition of social mobility," says David Burge, vice president for enrollment management. "You give people a chance to be successful, you support them while they're on their journey and as they exit and are always there for them as they come back, and you will build that reputation by delivering something of value."

Among the signs of a GMU degree's value, Campbell points out, is that 89% of GMU graduates are working in a role related to their career goals within six months. GMU's location in Fairfax County and proximity to major companies is another example. More than 600 employers, including Fortune 500 companies like Reston-based General Dynamics Corp. and McLean-based Capital One Financial Corp., recruit on campus, and there's a waitlist of others wanting to participate in career fairs. "And that's just my office," she says.

Maggie Tolan, VCU's senior assistant vice president for student services, wrapped up new student orientation in June. Her presentation to incoming freshmen — a third of whom are first-generation college students — included a diagram of a bobsled.

"If I just give you the textbook on how to bobsled, you're not going to be a good Olympic bobsledder, right?" Tolan asks. "You're going to need to practice. A lot of what we talk about at VCU is there's your degree, but it's really what you're doing in the four years to build the résumé, to build the network."

VCU's tools for student success include "major maps," year-by-year charts that help students set goals in categories ranging from degree planning to developing career skills and preparing for life after college. VCU also requires students to participate in real-world experiences like internships.



Virginia Commonwealth University focuses on providing students with real-world skills-building and networking opportunities in addition to academics, says Maggie Tolan, senior assistance vice president for student services.

It has a high acceptance rate (92% for the 2021-2022 academic year), but a lower graduation rate (67%) than some of its similarly sized peers. However, bachelor's degree holders from VCU — where the colleges of Art and Humanities and Sciences are the largest — can expect their degrees to net them \$1.03 million in earnings power over a 40-year career, according to Georgetown's study.

"For our [graduates] ... we are earning ... 77% more than a high school graduate that never went to college," says Tolan. "I think that's a pretty good darn investment."

Buyer beware

Those who tout higher education's return on investment also acknowledge that student loan debt remains a huge concern.

About 1 million Virginians owed \$41 billion in federal student loan debt in 2020, according to the VCU Wilder report. While a college degree holder may make more money over the course of a career than people who didn't earn a degree, Tod Massa, SCHEV's director of policy analytics and data warehousing, offers a "buyer beware" caveat.

"College is not for everyone. And, unless you can afford it, I don't think you should see the college experience as an experience

to purchase,” Massa says. While college is a “high value opportunity,” it’s not a guarantee a student will land a particular job, he says. Prospective students and families should also consider what they value about education.

Nationally, undergraduate enrollment remains about 6% to 7% below pre-pandemic levels. About 1.16 million fewer undergrad students were enrolled in spring 2023 than in spring 2020, according to a May report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Undergraduate admissions at Virginia’s 15 four-year public universities performed better, declining just 2% between fall 2020 and fall 2022, according to an analysis of SCHEV data.

Enrollment in the state’s 23 public community colleges has also declined, from a 2011 peak of 197,226 to 146,553 in fall 2022 (up slightly from 144,215 in fall 2021). There tends to be a direct

relationship between low unemployment and community college enrollment dips, Massa explains.

Virginia Community College System Chancellor David Doré, (*see related Q&A, Page 36*) calls student debt one of the “most significant problems in the country right now,” adding that the system needs to do a better job of marketing itself to become more nimble, faster and better designed around students’ needs.

With more than 51,000 full- and part-time students, Northern Virginia Community College, is by far the state’s largest two-year public college. NOVA has a labor market team that studies regional job posting data as well as long-term government forecasts to keep up with the region’s needs, says Steve Partridge, NOVA’s vice president of strategy, research and workforce innovation. The team frequently consults area employers about their needs

in order to better structure learning and programs. Still, Partridge says, the school can’t keep up with the regional demand for IT workers.

Many of NOVA’s students work while attending school — 38,595 are part-time students, according to 2021-2022 SCHEV data. Students who are already in the working world are likely to be more focused on the income they’d like to make, adding to their determination to reach their goals.

“I think the working adult has a much better view of that ROI, because they’re often self-funding,” Partridge says. “When they borrow, they know what they’re borrowing, because they’re probably also paying the rent. ... They’re very, very interested in what the job market is going to look like when they graduate and where the opportunities will be when they graduate.” ■

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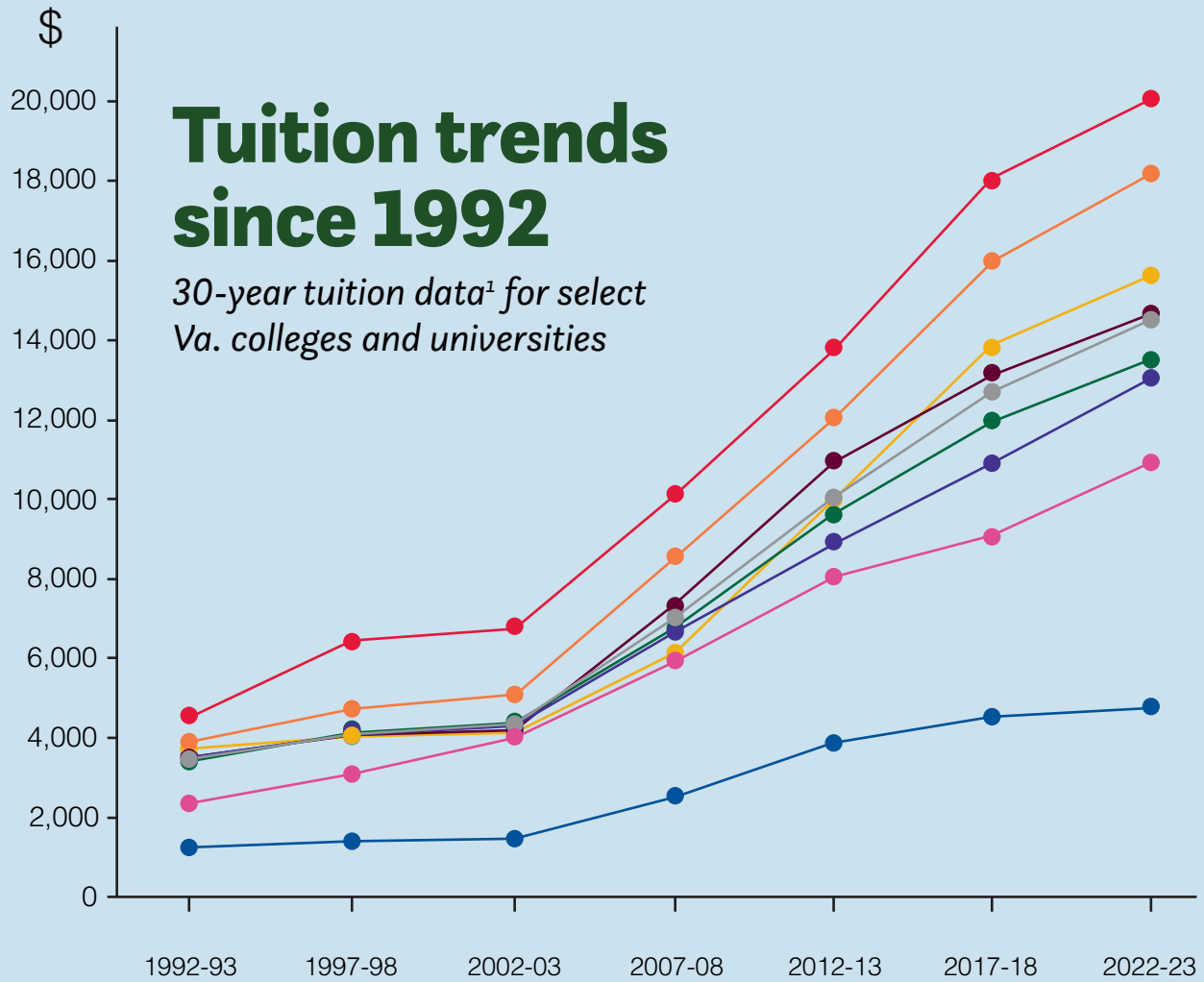
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- Virginia Military Institute ● University of Virginia ● Virginia Commonwealth University ● Virginia Tech
- George Mason University ● James Madison University ● Average for state universities^{2,5}
- Virginia Community College System³ ● National average for public four-year institutions^{4,6}

Source: State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

1 Annual in-state tuition and mandatory fees for undergraduate students; does not include room and board 2 Average of rates at four-year Virginia public universities 3 Does not include additional fees specific to eight community colleges that range from \$75 to \$880 per year 4 Source: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics 5 Weighted average for 2017-2018 due to varied rates at William & Mary, VCU and U.Va. 6 2022-23 Source: College Board



Return on investment at public universities

	Institution	Location	Full-time students ¹	Median debt	Graduation rate	Median 10-year salary ²	10-year net earnings ³	40-year net earnings ³
1	University of Virginia	Charlottesville	23,040	\$15,711	90%	\$77,048	\$205,000	\$1,649,000
2	Virginia Tech	Blacksburg	35,283	19,500	85%	73,159	188,000	1,559,000
3	Virginia Military Institute	Lexington	1,512	17,674	79%	71,910	196,000	1,544,000
4	George Mason University	Fairfax	27,622	16,000	70%	66,148	163,000	1,402,000
5	William & Mary	Williamsburg	8,521	16,500	91%	64,723	160,000	1,373,000
6	James Madison University	Harrisonburg	19,969	17,076	84%	61,268	143,000	1,292,000
7	University of Mary Washington	Fredericksburg	3,080	15,395	65%	54,819	115,000	1,142,000
8	Christopher Newport University	Newport News	4,432	19,500	75%	55,027	95,000	1,127,000
9	Radford University	Radford	6,191	16,305	57%	50,383	121,000	1,065,000
10	Old Dominion University	Norfolk	15,582	17,000	52%	49,678	122,000	1,053,000
11	Virginia Commonwealth University	Richmond	23,394	17,000	67%	50,106	97,000	1,036,000
12	Longwood University	Farmville	3,184	18,760	67%	45,952	96,000	958,000
14	U.Va.'s College at Wise	Wise	1,062	12,000	46%	41,055	116,000	885,000
15	Virginia State University	Petersburg	4,286	16,000	39%	41,987	82,000	869,000
16	Norfolk State University	Norfolk	4,877	17,250	37%	39,696	96,000	840,000

¹ Fall 2022 enrollment data from State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ² Median annual salary 10 years after enrollment, based on data from U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard. ³ Net earnings are adjusted cumulative income, based on salary remaining constant 10 years after enrollment and deducting five years of college attendance costs. **Source:** Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce report: Ranking 4,500 Colleges by ROI (2022)

Return on investment at private and nonprofit universities

	Institution	Location	Full-time students ¹	Median debt	Graduation rate	Median 10-year salary ²	10-year net earnings ³	40-year net earnings ³
1	Washington and Lee University	Lexington	2,238	\$18,750	95%	\$86,020	\$216,000	\$1,828,000
2	University of Richmond	Richmond	3,494	18,592	88%	69,310	155,000	1,454,000
3	Hampden-Sydney College	Hampden-Sydney	843	19,500	67%	65,446	96,000	1,323,000
4	Marymount University	Arlington County	2,610	20,000	58%	60,360	112,000	1,243,000
5	Randolph-Macon College	Ashland	1,450	21,500	67%	53,288	81,000	1,079,000
6	Hampton University	Hampton	2,440	18,500	59%	52,372	54,000	1,036,000
7	Roanoke College	Salem	1,759	22,250	68%	50,770	84,000	1,035,000
8	Shenandoah University	Winchester	2,911	20,500	59%	50,385	78,000	1,023,000
9	University of Lynchburg	Lynchburg	1,977	21,855	60%	49,490	85,000	1,013,000
10	Bridgewater College	Bridgewater	1,413	18,500	62%	48,160	106,000	1,009,000
11	Sweet Briar College	Sweet Briar	450	14,000	39%	48,425	64,000	972,000
12	Randolph College	Lynchburg	532	17,103	55%	46,968	80,000	961,000
13	Averett University⁴	Danville	1,150	17,149	42%	45,467	70,000	922,000
14	Bluefield University	Bluefield	808	12,000	31%	43,825	66,000	887,000
15	Emory & Henry College	Emory	1,302	19,000	57%	42,500	86,000	883,000
16	Virginia Wesleyan University	Virginia Beach	1,099	13,000	50%	43,579	65,000	881,000
17	Regent University	Virginia Beach	3,517	11,235	58%	41,712	92,000	873,000
18	Eastern Mennonite University	Harrisonburg	876	18,750	59%	42,697	72,000	872,000
19	Liberty University	Lynchburg	534,013	15,909	49%	42,394	27,000	822,000
20	Mary Baldwin University	Staunton	1,759	12,950	43%	39,538	80,000	821,000
21	Ferrum College	Ferrum	754	14,000	28%	40,224	54,000	808,000
22	Virginia Union University	Richmond	13,626	26,000	31%	37,830	40,000	749,000
23	Southern Virginia University	Buena Vista	973	15,750	31%	36,607	58,000	744,000
24	Hollins University	Roanoke	701	25,000	61%	35,969	48,000	723,000

¹ Fall 2022 enrollment data from State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ² Median annual salary 10 years after enrollment, based on data from U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard. ³ Net earnings are adjusted cumulative income, based on salary remaining constant 10 years after enrollment and deducting five years of college attendance costs. ⁴ Does not include online students
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce report: Ranking 4,500 Colleges by ROI (2022)

Return on investment at community colleges

	Institution	Location	Full-time students ¹	Part-time students ¹	Median debt	Graduation rate	Median 10-year salary ²	10-year net earnings ³	40-year net earnings ³
1	Northern Virginia	Annandale	38,595	13,301	\$6,823	26%	\$47,528	\$225,000	\$1,115,000
2	Piedmont Virginia	Charlottesville	3,970	1,052	5,500	41%	36,834	179,000	869,000
3	Brightpoint	Chester	6,813	1,979	5,500	27%	36,395	179,000	862,000
4	Laurel Ridge	Middleton	3,981	1,739	6,000	39%	36,424	179,000	862,000
5	Germanna	Locust Grove	5,523	2,165	5,500	35%	36,336	174,000	855,000
6	Blue Ridge	Weyers Cave	2,477	1,085	6,000	32%	36,441	171,000	854,000
7	Reynolds	Richmond	5,175	2,352	8,120	22%	34,932	172,000	827,000
8	New River	Dublin	2,608	1,372	6,500	33%	34,138	180,000	819,000
9	Tidewater	Norfolk	11,286	4,909	5,500	23%	35,053	160,000	817,000
10	Virginia Western	Roanoke	4,233	1,627	7,000	33%	34,349	173,000	817,000
11	Virginia Peninsula	Hampton	4,239	1,779	6,800	23%	33,484	165,000	793,000
12	Mountain Gateway	Clifton Forge	663	283	6,630	40%	31,874	161,000	758,000
14	Rappahannock	Glenns	1,957	634	N/A	34%	31,543	154,000	745,000
15	Wytheville	Wytheville	1,408	708	5,500	48%	30,775	161,000	738,000
16	Central Virginia	Lynchburg	2,320	1,068	5,500	35%	30,282	167,000	735,000
17	Virginia Highlands	Abingdon	1,328	740	N/A	34%	30,494	156,000	728,000
18	Southwest Virginia	Cedar Bluff	1,142	1,021	N/A	35%	30,439	139,000	710,000
19	Eastern Shore	Melfa	476	182	N/A	28%	29,114	143,000	689,000
20	Paul D. Camp	Franklin	885	303	5,500	29%	28,026	149,000	675,000
21	Danville	Danville	1,377	897	5,500	31%	28,649	131,000	668,000
22	Mountain Empire	Big Stone Gap	1,105	823	N/A	40%	27,920	140,000	663,000
23	Southside	Alberta	2,170	942	N/A	37%	27,292	138,000	649,000
24	Patrick & Henry	Martinsville	796	1,065	N/A	35%	26,660	146,000	646,000

¹ Fall 2022 enrollment data from State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ² Median annual salary 10 years after enrollment, based on data from U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard.

³ Net earnings are adjusted cumulative income, based on salary remaining constant 10 years after enrollment and deducting three years of college attendance costs.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce report: Ranking 4,500 Colleges by ROI (2022)

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Working a hybrid schedule in her job as a health policy and payment specialist for the American Physical Therapy Association, Rachel Miller logs in remotely Mondays and Wednesdays from her Alexandria apartment.

Here to stay

The future of work is hybrid, say employers and HR execs

by Courtney Mabeus-Brown

Rachel Miller spent half of her undergraduate studies and then a portion of graduate school learning remotely behind a computer screen. Even the first job she took that aligned with her career goals — completing contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic while she worked toward her master's degree in public health — was a remote job, performed while she was sheltering at home with her three roommates.

By the time she was set to graduate from her master's degree program at the University of North Carolina in May 2022, Miller, who had taken some online courses even before the pandemic, was already accustomed to the autonomy and flexibility that remote work provides, but she also wanted a workplace where she could collaborate with and learn from her colleagues.

"Hybrid was definitely my ideal scenario," says Miller, who has been working a hybrid schedule for a little more than a year in her job as a health policy and payment specialist for the Alexandria-based American Physical Therapy Association, which represents 100,000 physical therapy professionals and students nationwide.

She works 22 hours a week in the office on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. On Mondays and Wednesdays, Miller might log the rest of her hours — APTA has a 37.5-hour work week — from a coffee shop in the morning and then come home and prep

dinner during her lunch hour. "It's nice that we do have that flexibility," she says.

It has been more than three years since the pandemic upended the workplace. While remote work may once have felt like a novel experiment, it is now a routine way of life for many white-collar workers. But since early 2022, the model has been shifting toward hybrid work.

Among workers whose jobs can be performed remotely, about 41% are working a hybrid schedule, up from 35% in January 2022, according to a Pew Research Center survey released in March. Meanwhile, the share of fully remote workers shrank from 43% to 35% during the same period.

Many offices reopened long ago, but with some employees already adjusted to a newfound work-life balance and employers confronted by a tight labor force, hybrid work has become less of a compromise and more of a minimum expectation. And experts and employers expect hybrid is here to stay.

"The norms have been dramatically altered because of remote work and the mass migration to remote work," says Timothy Golden, a professor who studies remote work at New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "People — employers and employees alike — have been thinking differently about remote work and how work can best be carried out. Certainly, one of the big changes that has occurred as a result of many people working remotely is that now that is an acceptable way of working."

From novel to normal

Remote and hybrid work models aren't new. Decades ago, the federal government recognized telework as a powerful recruitment and retention tool and enacted legislation around it.

In 2019, only 24% of U.S. workers spent time working at home, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the share of employees who worked regularly from home in 2022 was 34%, down from 38% in 2021. According to Pew, only 7% of U.S. workers were fully remote before the pandemic.

But even before the pandemic expedited a mass experiment in remote work, some Virginia-based employers were already considering or piloting hybrid work arrangements.

Rachel Miller's boss, APTA CEO Justin Moore, says workplace flexibility fits in with his association's overall mission of wellness and helps with recruitment.

But prior to the pandemic, most employees worked on-site, and APTA's few remote and flex work options were at the "margins of our strategy," he says. The organization also wasn't technologically equipped for remote work, but that changed in 2021 after APTA opened its new headquarters across from the new Potomac Yard Metro station. Planned before the pandemic, the headquarters includes technology to support remote work.

APTA implemented its 22-hour weekly in-office hybrid policy, which represents a 60/40 office/remote split, at the beginning of 2022. Employees commit to their in-office hours at the beginning of the year, and most choose to work on-site three days a week.

"It has created a little bit of spirit in the office that Thursdays is sort of a high-impact day of collaborative meetings, of energy in the building," he says.

APTA also offers employees a week of "work from anywhere" time, a benefit that Moore says has been more popular with employees than any other perk.

Atlantic Union Bank added a similar perk for its hybrid workers, who total more than 1,000 employees out of a workforce of a little more than 1,800 people. (About 250 of Atlantic Union's workers, or nearly 14%, are fully remote, mostly working in customer care, IT or risk and compliance



American Physical Therapy Association CEO Justin Moore says flexible work fits in with the organization's overall mission of wellness.

roles.) The Richmond-based bank, which in July announced plans to acquire Danville-based American National Bank, now provides its employees 12 remote flex days a year.

"If they wanted to work a month from the beach in December or work remotely for a month at the end of the year, if they bank those things, they've got flexibility to do just that," says the bank's chief human resources officer, Clare Miller.

Atlantic Union added the flex days in June when it also instituted an updated hybrid work policy that generally calls for working in the office Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, though some teams can modify that policy based on their needs.

'An evolution'

Newer technologies that make it possible to work remotely have emerged alongside conversations about corporate social responsibility and spiking employee power.

"If you're going to have a hybrid environment, you better make sure that people need to be there doing the things you could only do in person," says Eli Jamison, an assistant professor at Virginia Tech University's Pamplin College of Business.

But as workers log in from home offices, coffee shops or even the beach, remote work has begun meeting with increased C-suite resistance — and from some surprising quarters. Some of the nation's biggest tech companies, including Amazon.com, Facebook parent company Meta, X (formerly Twitter) and Zoom — arguably the world's largest enabler of remote work — have demanded workers return to the office in some fashion, citing problems with teambuilding, productivity or even fairness among those whose jobs demand them to show up in person.

Even Gov. Glenn Youngkin has weighed in; the Republican governor's administration ordered state employees back to the

office by July 5, 2022, which led to at least 300 resignations, according to a report from WRIC-TV, the ABC affiliate in Richmond. Most state employees are allowed one weekly telecommuting day, unless they receive special dispensation.

Amazon, which is building its East Coast HQ2 headquarters in Arlington County, where it plans to employ 25,000 people, mandated that corporate employees return to the office at least three days per week starting in May, leading to walkouts. More recently, a leaked message, obtained by Business Insider, showed the e-tailer would force 'voluntary resignations' among employees who refused to relocate around team hubs. Amazon has said it plans to have about 8,000 employees working hybrid schedules out of HQ2's Metropolitan Park buildings by early October.

This has all been followed by news that the Biden administration will push to "aggressively execute" plans for more federal in-office work as early as September, Axios reported in early August. While the administration says it doesn't plan to eliminate all remote work, the move comes on the heels of a July Government Accountability Office review that found that 17 out of 24 federal agencies were using 25% or less of their headquarters space in early 2023.

Some 1.5 million U.S. employees encountered new workplace attendance policies as of July, with another 1 million workers facing such mandates through the end of the year, according to research from Chicago-based real estate company JLL.

Falls Church-based Kastle Systems, which tracks entry data for 2,600 office buildings across 47 states, has estimated employee attendance hovering around an average 50% in major metropolitan markets this year. And JLL, which has noted that year-over-year worker attendance has increased by about 9% in 2023, has predicted that worker attendance could increase to more than 80% for the most popular midweek workdays by the end of this year.

While that may sound like good news to those in commercial real estate, return-to-office mandates also create opportunities for other companies to pick up talent, says Rensselaer's Golden.

According to a job growth report issued in July from Scoop Technologies and People Data Labs, companies with workforces that are fully remote or structured hybrid (meaning the employer has set parameters around in-office time), added jobs at twice the pace of companies that are full time in-office from March to May.

Instituting hybrid policies has been "an evolution," says Miller at Atlantic Union, which updated its policy this year to standardize three days in the office as opposed to suggesting two to three. It is a message to employees that in-office collaboration, opportunities for formal and informal development and participating in company culture remain important and are in the best interest of teams, Miller says. While some managers were nervous that the shift would cause employees to leave, Miller says those numbers have been "immaterial," resulting in 1% or 2% turnover.

"We wanted ... in-office vibrancy," Miller says. "We wanted them to really see and feel the tangible benefits that can be gleaned when we have critical mass."

Since June, teams have been eating lunches together, having one-on-one meetings and getting together to brainstorm in cross-functional groups, she says. Those interactions have been further helped by consolidating bank offices. "We recently moved staff in Richmond corporate offices to be more closely aligned by business unit, further deepening collaboration," explains Miller.

Roanoke-based law firm Woods Rogers Vandeventer Black implemented its new hybrid work policy, effective Sept. 5. While the firm didn't previously have a policy, other than to encourage employees to work in-office "more frequently than not," it now "strongly encourages" employees work in the office three days a week but does not specify particular days, says firm President Dan Summerlin.

About 25% to a third of the firm's 135 lawyers already work from the office full time, Summerlin says, with about 15% to 20% working mostly remote. That leaves about half of the firm's lawyers working in hybrid mode, Summerlin says. "We



Instituting a hybrid work policy has been 'an evolution,' says Clare Miller, chief human resources officer for Richmond-based Atlantic Union Bank.

understand that's likely the way the world is going to be going forward," he adds.

While WRVB won't take attendance, attorneys who work remotely may have their offices turned into shared spaces, and the firm may consider different office reconfigurations as its leases are renewed, Summerlin says. The firm has seven or eight new associates starting, which was the impetus for the policy.

"We're just going to be a little more smart about our space because having hallways with empty offices is not a great boost for morale for the staff or to the young lawyer coming in," Summerlin says. "We sort of wanted to reiterate to everybody [that] we think we're better and our firm culture gets passed on more easily if people are working together ... in the office, as opposed to working from home."

At APTA, a desire to be fair to workers represented by the association who are "back in the hospitals and back in the clinics treating patients" drove the decision to work a hybrid schedule, Moore says. "We wanted to be respectful of our providers that were seeing patients."



Roanoke-based Woods Rogers Vandeventer Black implemented a hybrid work policy that "strongly encourages" employees to work from the office three days a week, says the law firm's president, Dan Summerlin.



Rachel Miller (center) talks with co-workers Amelia Sullivan and Paxton Styles at the American Physical Therapy Association's Potomac Yard headquarters. Miller works 22 hours a week in the office on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

Productivity problems?

One looming question in the debate over where employees work is how much work they're getting done, and findings seem contradictory on this point.

Some studies have indicated hybrid and remote employees may work longer hours, in part because they are commuting less. For instance, a 2021 Microsoft study of 61,000 remote workers found their work hours increased 10%, though it also found a decrease in cross-company communication and collaboration between different business units. Additionally, a January University of Chicago study reported that teleworking saves workers an average 72 minutes of commuting per day, with about 40% of that time savings devoted to additional work.

A July report from Stanford University, however, found that fully remote employees are 10% to 20% less productive than their in-person peers. Hybrid work appeared to have no impact on productivity. The authors noted that hybrid work models have become popular among employers as a recruitment and retention tool and predict working

from home will continue to grow as technologies improve.

In March, Nick Bloom, a Stanford professor and one of three authors of the university's evolution of work study, tweeted that he expects that, in the long run, workforces will settle out with hybrid representing 50% of all jobs, fully in-person jobs 40% and fully remote jobs accounting for about 10%.

Rachel Miller spent the first 90 days of her job working in APTA's office as part of the organization's policy to aid with onboarding. Being in the office gives her the chance to informally engage with co-workers who may have expertise in areas she doesn't. On days when she's working remotely, Miller says, she may save questions for her supervisor.

"It's much more fun for me to drop in the office and just ask a few questions than it is to explain something over [Microsoft] Teams or have a call on a day when we're at home," she says.

Moore, APTA's CEO, estimates the association's productivity is about 90% to 95% of what it had been when employees were on-site. And that's a figure he's willing to accept.

"We might get 95[%] productivity if we look at it on a week basis, but my guess is ... because they have that choice and job satisfaction, that we gain [from] it in the long term," he says.

Some companies, meanwhile, have found that offering fully remote work has given them a competitive edge in hiring without sacrificing productivity.

That remains the case for Atlantic Union, Miller says, though the bank is being more selective in its remote hiring as it has found competition for talent has diminished compared with 2021, which she says was the peak of the "war for talent."

Before the pandemic, Richmond-based marketing firm Workshop Digital worked fully in-office out of a 10,000-square-foot space in the city's Scott's Addition neighborhood. With the help of a real estate firm, the company later found a tenant for the space after it sat empty for about a year. Now, about two-thirds of its 35 employees are local, and while Workshop Digital doesn't have

a hybrid policy, those who are in the area average one or two days in its co-working space weekly, says Brian Forrester, the company's co-founder and CEO.

Workshop Digital leaders discussed adding remote workers before the pandemic, Forrester says, but worried it might stifle innovation and productivity. That hasn't been the case. Now, the company employs

remote workers from 10 states and is seeking a new, smaller office. Offering remote work has been a "major perk" in casting a wider net for talent, he adds.

"We've been able to hire sort of nationally the best talent available versus only those that would either relocate to Richmond, or, you know, those that were already local to Richmond." ■



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Talking telework

Interviews by Courtney Mabeus-Brown

Executives and managers share how remote and hybrid work has transformed workplaces, industries and day-to-day life across the commonwealth.



SHAWN AVERY

President and CEO, Hampton Roads Workforce Council
Norfolk

Prior to the pandemic, did Hampton Roads Workforce Council allow hybrid or remote work?

We allowed employees to occasionally work remotely [due to] extenuating circumstances, such as car trouble, sick family members, etc.

What is your policy today, and how is it working?

Last year, we implemented a 4 ½-day workweek, plus a two-hour-a-week flex-time policy — closing all offices a half day on

Friday. [We are] currently evaluating whether additional adjustments are possible.

What challenges do you foresee with remote/hybrid work among your staff?

Some of our positions are based in career centers where they work directly with job seekers. The Workforce Council also has robust, mobile outreach programming where team members work from a variety of places, including libraries and coffee shops. Lastly, the council has multiple administrative teams that work predominantly in nondirect roles. This complexity requires a flexible approach to remote/hybrid scheduling to ensure that the needs of both the community and our employees [can] be met.

What trends are you seeing among partner businesses?

Industries that are more focused on the traditional trades like shipbuilding and ship repair, manufacturing, construction, health care and the hospitality industry cannot typically accommodate a remote workforce. Consequently, those employers have had to increase wage rates to maintain and attract workers. ... Ultimately, all industries have had to become more creative in how they onboard and communicate with new employees to remain competitive in their respective fields. From what we are seeing locally, as well as nationally, hybrid scheduling seems to be the new standard.

KATE ELLIS

General manager, Hotel Indigo Old Town Alexandria; Chairperson, Visit Alexandria Board of Governors
Alexandria

How do area hoteliers view the shift to more hybrid and remote work?

Our key is to focus on what is, not what was, and what we see is that hybrid and remote is driving the need for business, government and association managers to meet in small groups to strategize. ... So, as Alexandria hoteliers, we're all focused on how we can share this beautiful small city and make our spaces and amenities fun and exceptional. We want people to come here, collaborate on their best work and then go home and tell their friends how great it was. They're our secret sales force.

What challenges do hybrid and remote work create for the hospitality industry?

Our biggest challenge has most likely been the compression of the planning window. We get calls from meeting planners sometimes with just a week's notice. And because workers are now meeting less frequently in person in an office, they need to do more high-value work in our hotels.

How has hybrid work shifted the type of traveler you see, as well as their meeting needs?

We're seeing more local and regional guests. That's a function both of hybrid work and a desire to meet in locations that are easy to get to. In terms of the experience, again, it's as much about what happens outside the meeting room as in. Everyone already has state-of-the-art hybrid meeting space in their office, but what sets an organization apart is a meeting that reflects the personality of your organization, that everyone remembers and authentically connects you to the place in which you meet.

AMY BRODERICK

Senior vice president, Cushman & Wakefield | Thalheimer
Glen Allen



What trends have you seen in commercial real estate due to remote and hybrid work?

Many companies are able to downsize their office footprint due to remote work, but because their business is still thriving, they don't necessarily have to cut costs. In these scenarios, they are relocating to higher-quality, more desirable properties.

How has hybrid or remote work changed your day-to-day worklife?

If at all possible, I like to arrange property showings for Tuesday through Thursday. Office buildings tend to be more active and, as a result, more welcoming during the middle of the week. ... I'm thinking about how we can improve these properties ... to make a return to office more attractive for current tenants, prospective tenants and their employees. ... Our office stock in Richmond is dated, and between the costs of construction and the limited rent growth here, a plethora of new construction is not on the horizon. ... 'Spec suites' are a part of the conversation with many landlords. These are office suites that are move-in ready, with fresh paint and new flooring, and they are sometimes furnished. ... In Richmond, a lot of property owners are hesitant [to make improvements] due to the cost. For tenants, many have shortened their timeline to occupancy and so waiting months for permitting and build-out isn't feasible. ... Landlords also need to consider that they may be competing for tenants with a sublease.

Is an office real estate "apocalypse" ahead, as some experts have warned?

I don't foresee an apocalypse — at least not in Richmond. ... There is still more vacancy to come. There are still companies expanding as well, so it will just take some time for the office needs of the community as a whole to balance out.





SUZANNE GARDNER

Sales operations manager, Kopis Blacksburg

How did you become a fully remote worker?

My personal life brought me to the [New River Valley] this summer, which led to a conversation about full-time remote work with [Greenville, South Carolina-based tech company] Kopis. They were incredibly accepting of the idea and were willing to provide anything I needed to get settled and be successful remotely.

What are the positives in working remotely?

I save money by not commuting or eating out for lunch. I don't feel inclined to work late at the office, and I'm able to manage household chores throughout the day without sacrificing time in the evenings. I also have an incredibly clingy golden retriever who is a fan of midday walks on the Huckleberry Trail.

What are the challenges?

When I have been in the office, organic conversations with colleagues have always been a good way to build trust and rapport. Being remote, I have to make a conscious effort to ensure that I am touching base with my team throughout the day.

How have you connected with the broader community to find connections?

Even before I relocated to Virginia, I was searching online to see where I could get plugged in to meet people and get involved once I got here. ... I reached out to several people through the GetzKnowNoke partnership in Roanoke and set up coffee meetings with them to connect and learn more about Roanoke. I got involved with Blacksburg Young Professionals and signed up for happy hours. Lastly, I was able to find the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technical Council and joined their Women in Technology group and signed up for their luncheons and networking events. ... People want to see you succeed, especially when they know you are new, have a skillset and want to get plugged in.

REBECCA GELLER

President and CEO, The Geller Law Group Fairfax County

Why did you establish your law firm as a remote workplace?

While working as an attorney in a large law firm, I saw brilliant women fleeing the profession because firm partners showed utter disregard for attorneys' lives outside the firm. ... As the mom of a baby and a toddler in 2011, I knew there had to be a better way to run a law firm that enabled women to be moms and successful lawyers, but I didn't see an alternative model in existence, so I created one. ... The Geller Law Group has grown to 33 women with 37 children among us, and the average age is 6 years old. Our kids get to grow up seeing their parents do work they care about while also being actively involved parents.



Prior to the pandemic, what were the biggest obstacles with remote work that your firm faced?

We have learned over the years that not everyone is successful in a remote work environment. Some people lack the technical skills, while others are better suited for an in-person team environment. ... If someone is not suited for our workstyle, we both typically figure it out quickly.

The firm has offices in Fairfax and Washington, D.C. Why did you establish those offices, and how do your employees use them?

We ... have office space for in-person meetings with clients, partners or other firm attorneys and team meetings/events. We also utilize the offices for notary services and document signings with our clients. Our administrative team regularly works in the office to handle tasks requiring a lot of paperwork and filings.



MICHELE LEWANE

CEO, founder and lead attorney, Injured Workers Law Firm Henrico County

When did your firm go back to the office 100%?

June 2020. ... We had some staff alternate days [that] they came in so it wasn't all at once. ... By September 2020, everyone was back in office.

What prompted the firm to go back to the office full time?

Basically, many of us were longing for collaboration so we started going back to the office. We wore masks and were socially distanced. About a third of the positions needed to be in the office since the jobs required organizing and scanning medical documents. One individual had health issues and decided to continue to work from home for over a year.

Did the firm previously allow hybrid or remote work outside of COVID-related closures?

We have one remote worker who lives in Ohio. She has worked remotely for 12 years. She was an awesome employee and when her family moved back to her hometown in Ohio, we couldn't [bear] to see her leave, so we created a remote position for her that worked and continues to work wonderfully.

How has being back in the office affected the firm?

We now see clients in the office, which is very different since we had been doing hearings and mediations and deposition via Webex or Zoom. ... There has [been] a very slight issue with recruitment if individuals solely want to work from home, but we haven't seen it much. Most of our clients prefer the convenience of not traveling to the office so they do not mind phone/Zoom appointments throughout their case. ■